Who Was Sappho of Lesbos? “The Poetess” of Ancient Greece

Sappho is one of the greatest poets of antiquity with a lasting impact on the literary world.

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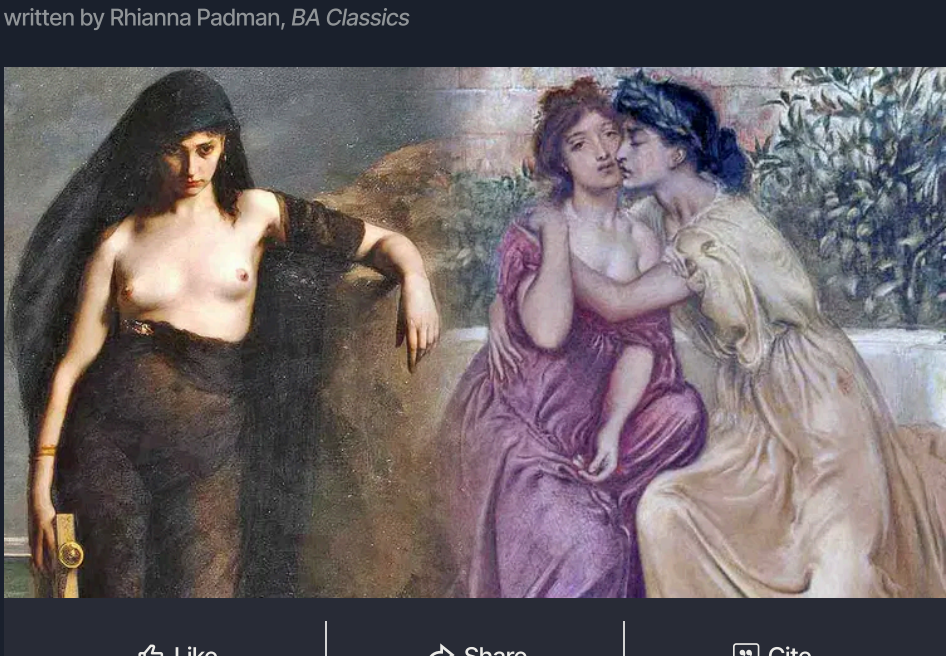

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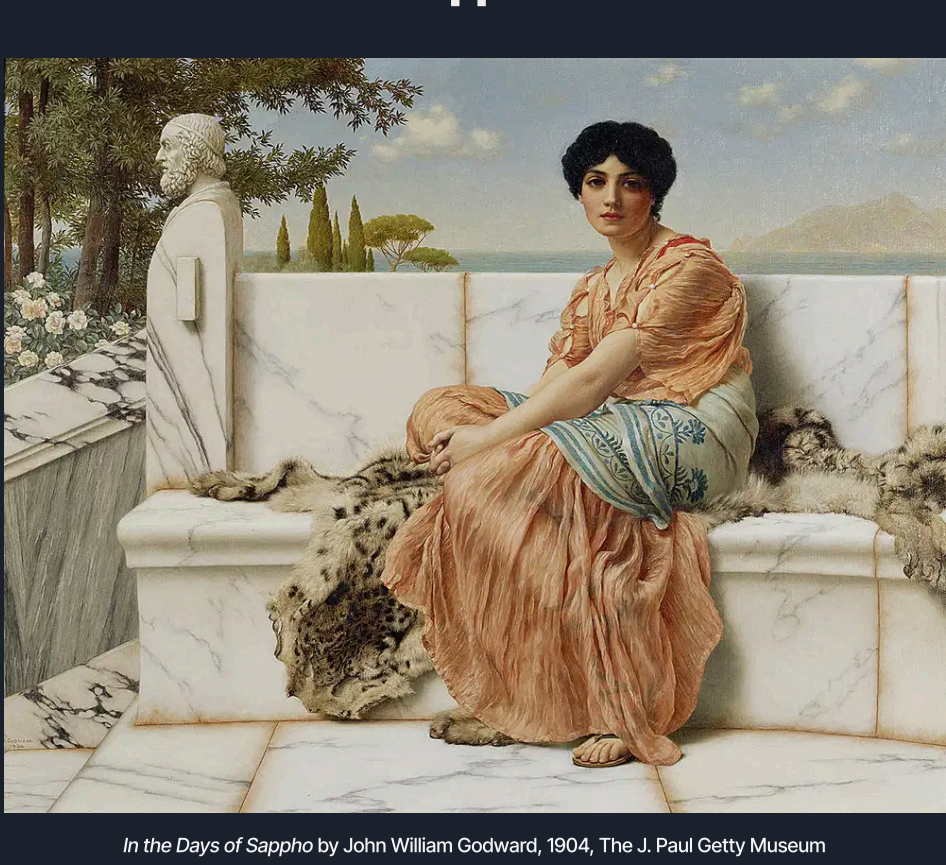
An ancient Greek poet hailing from the island of Lesbos, Sappho remains one of the most renowned and intriguing figures of ancient Greece. Revered as a bold and autonomous woman, she has become an emblematic figure for feminist movements across history. Although only a few fragments of her work have survived, they express a singular and inventive voice that has inspired countless writers over the centuries.

Her poetry is notable for its intimate portrayal of personal experience and relationships, and her use of vivid imagery and melodic language has secured her lasting fame as an icon of lyric poetry. Moreover, her personal life, relationships, and sexuality have long been a subject of fascination and speculation, adding to the allure of her legacy. Nonetheless, despite her profound influence, much of Sappho’s life and literary contributions remain shrouded in mystery, with scholars still debating the details of her biography.

The Affluent Life of Sappho of Lesbos

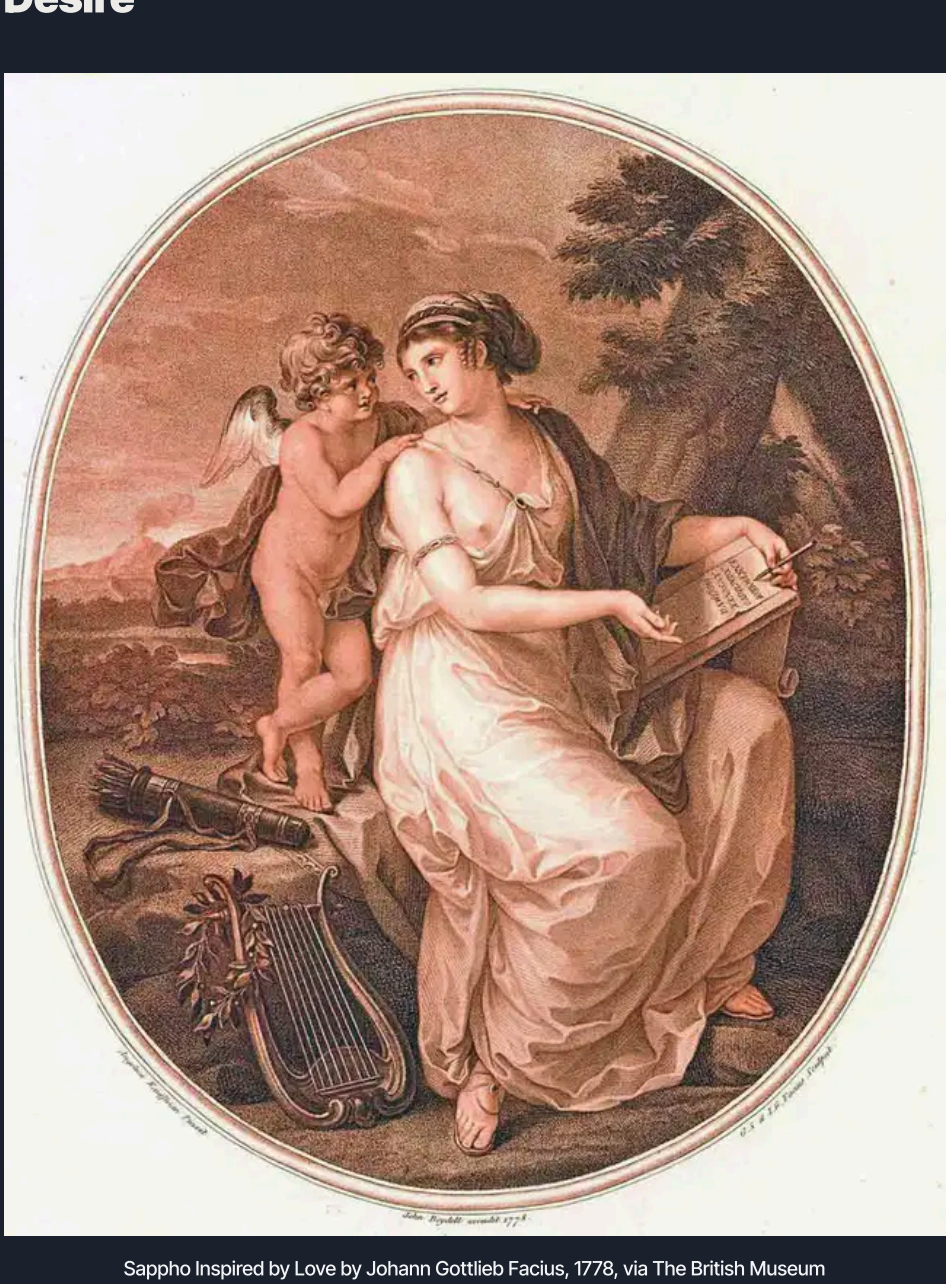


In the Days of Sappho by John William Godward, 1904, The J. Paul Getty Museum

Born into an aristocratic family around 630 BCE on the island of Lesbos, Sappho enjoyed a privileged upbringing that exposed her to a wide range of intellectual and artistic influences. Her family’s prominence in the political and cultural life of Lesbos facilitated her education in music, poetry, and dance. Although Sappho is believed to have been married at some point, the identity of her husband remains a mystery. It was thought that she may have been widowed or divorced. A child named Cleis, referenced in several of her poems, is thought to have possibly been her daughter.

The surviving fragments of Sappho’s poetry offer the primary source of information about her life and work. While these fragments provide valuable insights into her style and themes, they offer little direct information about her personal life or biography. However, references to Sappho in the writings of other ancient authors, such as Herodotus, who referred to her as “the tenth muse” in his *Histories*, provide some additional information about her life and work. Sappho’s poetry was also cited by other ancient authors, including Plato and Aristotle, in their own works. Yet, these references are often incomplete and brief, offering only a partial glimpse into the life of this legendary poet.

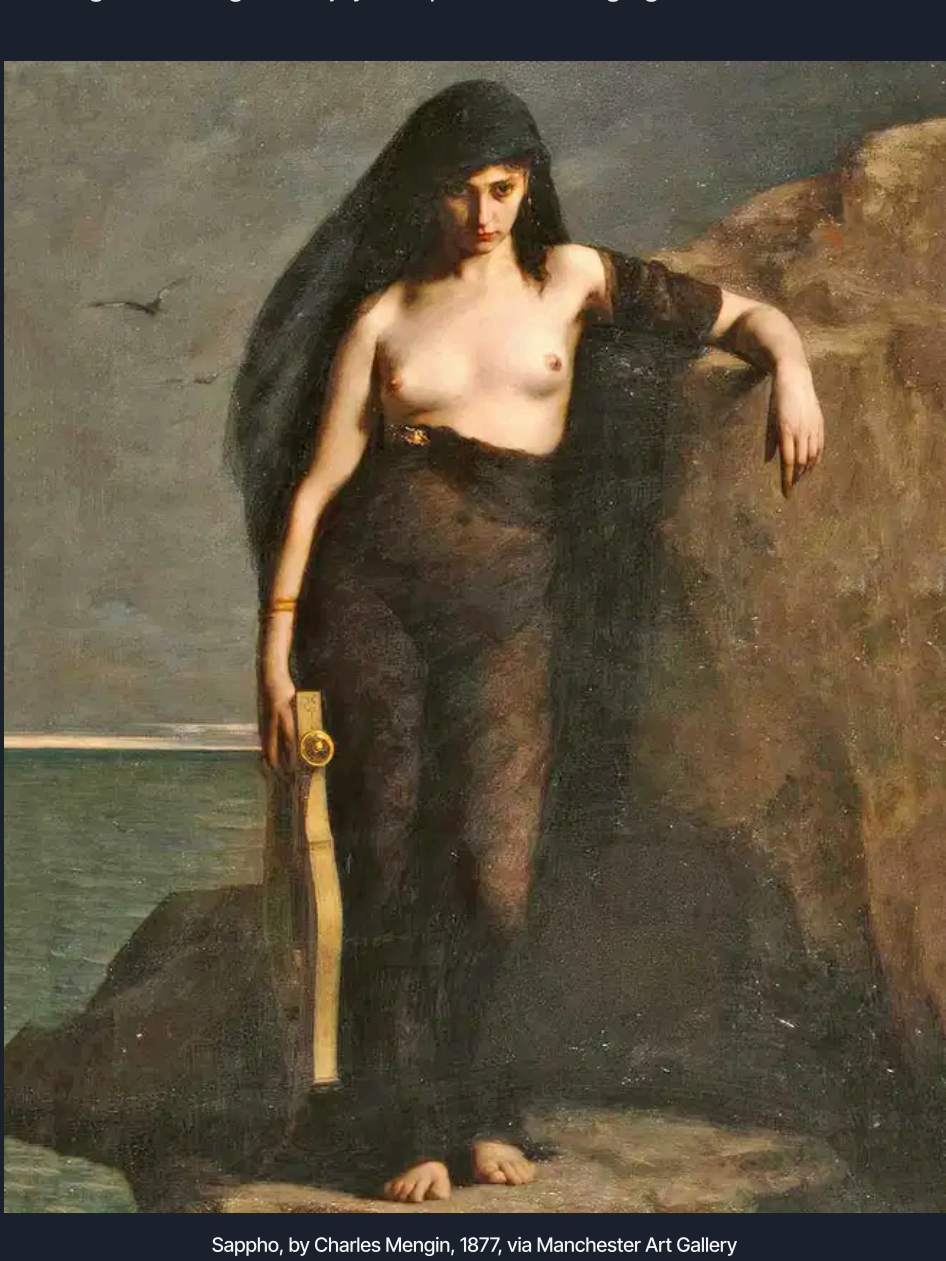
Themes in Sappho’s Poetry: Love, Beauty & Desire



Sappho Inspired by Love by Johann Gottlieb Facius, 1778, via The British Museum

Sappho’s poetry was renowned for its focus on love, desire, and beauty. Her frank and sensual depictions of physical and emotional intimacy were ground-breaking for her time, pushing the boundaries of societal norms. She celebrated the transformative power of love, often describing the intense and intimate connections that could arise between lovers, regardless of gender. Her poetry explored the physical and emotional appeal of both men and women, detailing and emphasizing the erotic aspects of physical beauty. Many of her poems also stressed a deep sense of community and camaraderie, particularly capturing the bonds of friendship and the importance of human connection.

One of her most infamous poems, Fragment 31, begins with the speaker expressing their admiration for the beloved, comparing them to a god and remarking on their captivating voice. She, then, moves on to describe the physical symptoms of the speaker’s desire, including a fluttering heart, a weakened body, and a stuck voice. The poem ends with the speaker appealing to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, for aid in gaining the love of her beloved. The speaker promises to offer many splendid gifts to Aphrodite in return for her assistance. Fragment 31 demonstrates Sappho’s ability to capture the intensity of human emotion, expressing the full range of feelings from joy and passion to longing and sorrow.



Sappho, by Charles Mengin, 1877, via Manchester Art Gallery

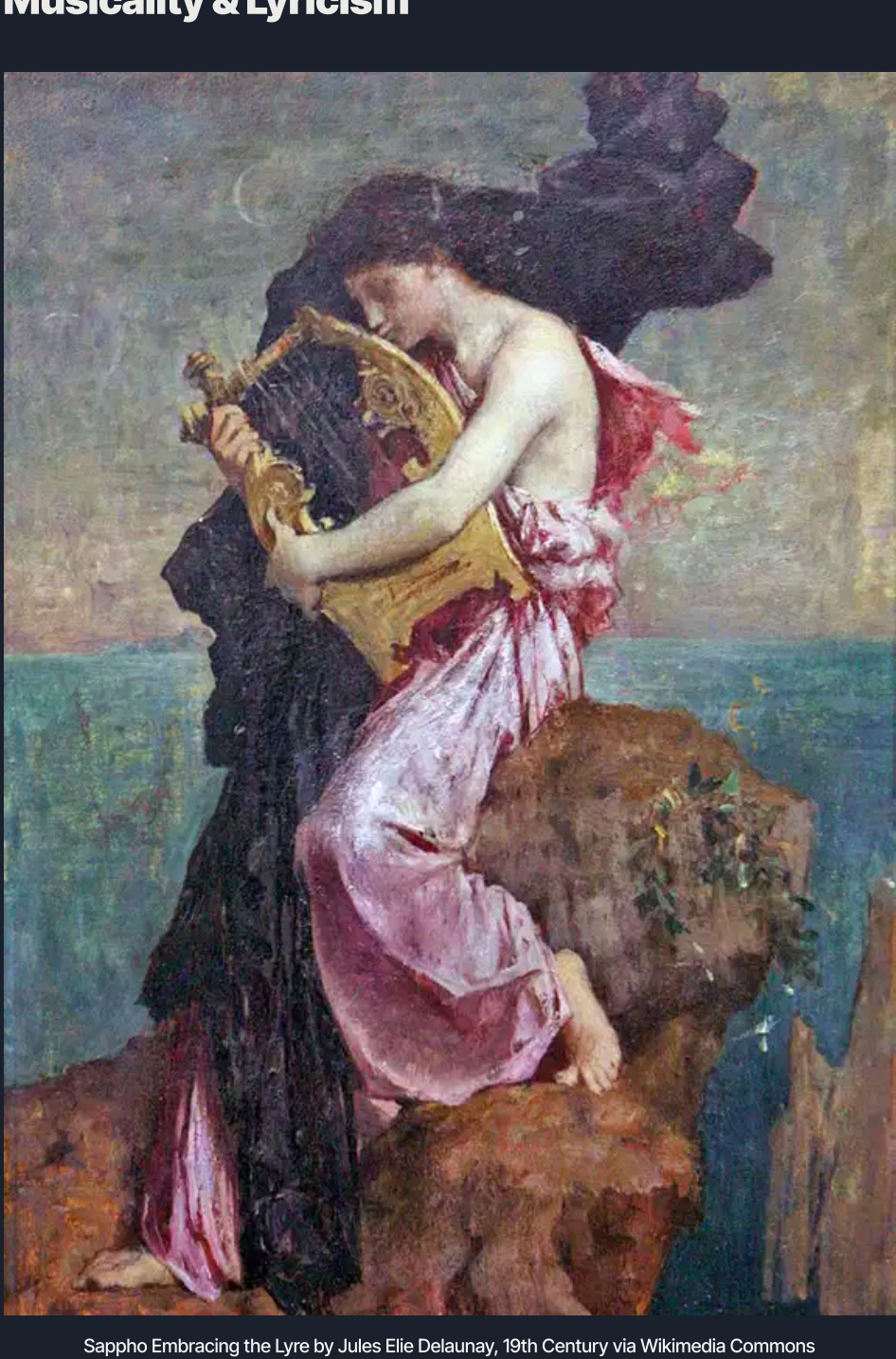
Sappho’s appreciation for the natural world was another important aspect of her poetry. She wove vivid descriptions of nature throughout her work, expressing a deep reverence for its beauty and power. By drawing parallels between the rhythms of nature and emotion, she created moving metaphors about the power of the human experience.

In Fragment 105, Sappho uses the vastness of the night sky to express the intensity of her longing for her lover, saying:

> **“Looking up at the stars, I know quite well / That, for all they care, I can go to hell”.**

In addition, her poetry reflected on the impermanence of life and the fleeting nature of all things. For example, in Fragment 1, Sappho compares the beauty of a woman to a “sweet-voiced rose,” emphasizing the briefness of youth and beauty. Her poems expressed a sense of melancholy or longing, suggesting that the only true solace lay in the experience of beauty and love. With her unique voice and innovative style, Sappho’s poetry continues to inspire and captivate readers to this day.

Musicality & Lyricism

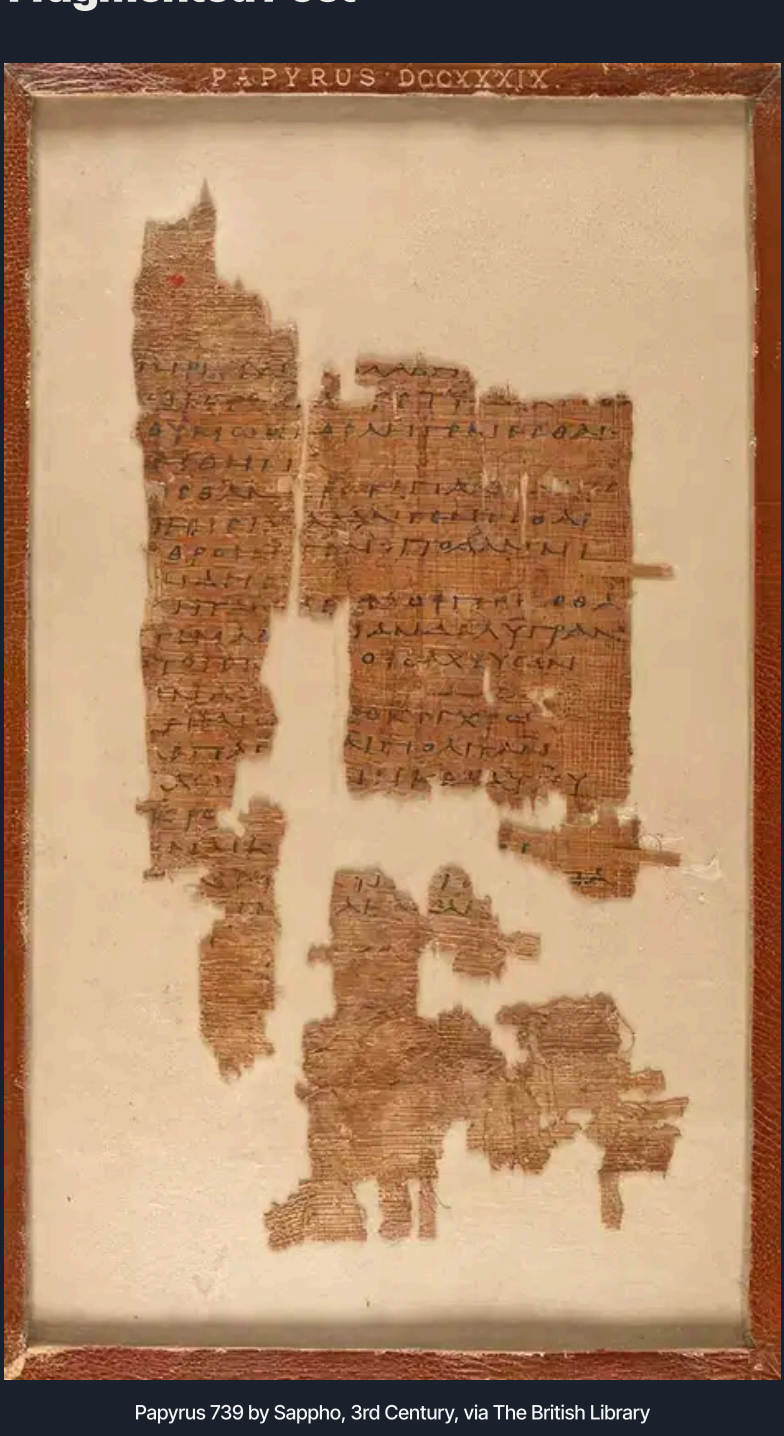


Sappho Embracing the Lyre by Jules Elie Delaunay, 19th Century via Wikimedia Commons

There are over 200 fragments of Sappho’s poetry that have been preserved in later texts or discovered by archaeologists. While some of the fragments are incomplete or damaged, they offer a glimpse into the poetic genius of Sappho, particularly her ability to create immersive sensory experiences through her use of rich, evocative imagery. Her poetry was a feast for the senses, painting vivid pictures with words and sounds. With great skill, she captured the beauty of love, describing the sights, sounds, and sensations of the world around her in intricate detail.

Of the surviving works of Sappho, there are nine complete poems known as the “Odes”. These works were likely composed as choral songs for public performances demonstrating Sappho’s musical and rhythmic talents. Indeed, Sappho’s poetic talent extended beyond the written word, as she was also a skilled musician. Her poetry was often accompanied by music and dance, and her work was characterized by its flowing, melodic lines. Sappho’s use of the Aeolic meter, with its complex rhythmic pattern of long and short syllables, gave her poetry a unique musical quality that set it apart from other works of the time. She also employed repeated phrases and refrains, creating a sense of structure and continuity that made her poetry easy to sing and remember. The result was a body of work that was not only beautiful to read but also a joy to hear and perform.

The Fragmented Poet

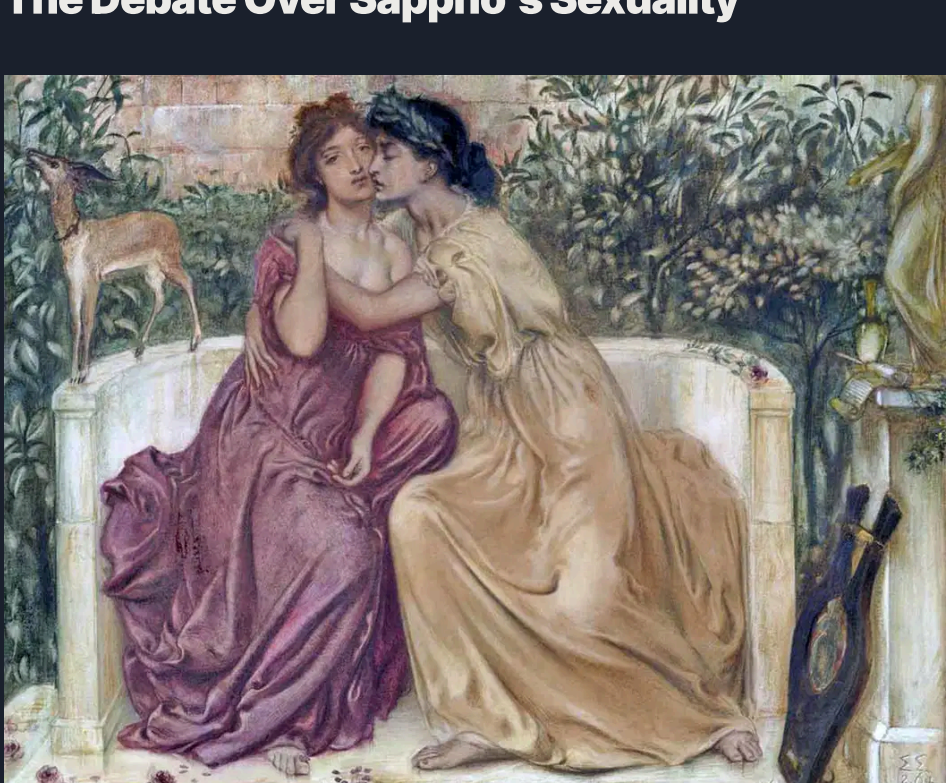


Papyrus 739 by Sappho, 3rd Century, via The British Library

The story of how Sappho’s poetry survived is shrouded in mystery and speculation. Although the exact reasons for the loss of her work remain unknown, many factors such as religious conflicts and the physical deterioration of papyrus and parchment, likely contributed to its disappearance. Regardless of these obstacles, fragments of her poetry were preserved through various means. Some were found on ancient pottery or tablets, while others were carefully copied by later writers and scholars who recognized the value of her work.

Among the most notable sources of Sappho’s poetry is the “Sappho papyrus,” a manuscript discovered in Egypt in the late 19th century that contained several previously unknown fragments of her writing, providing valuable insights into her style and themes. These fragments are often incomplete and disconnected from their original context, making it difficult to reconstruct Sappho’s poems in their entirety. As a result, scholars had to depend on their understanding of the Greek language and culture, as well as their familiarity with Sappho’s distinctive style, to piece together the poems.

The Debate Over Sappho’s Sexuality

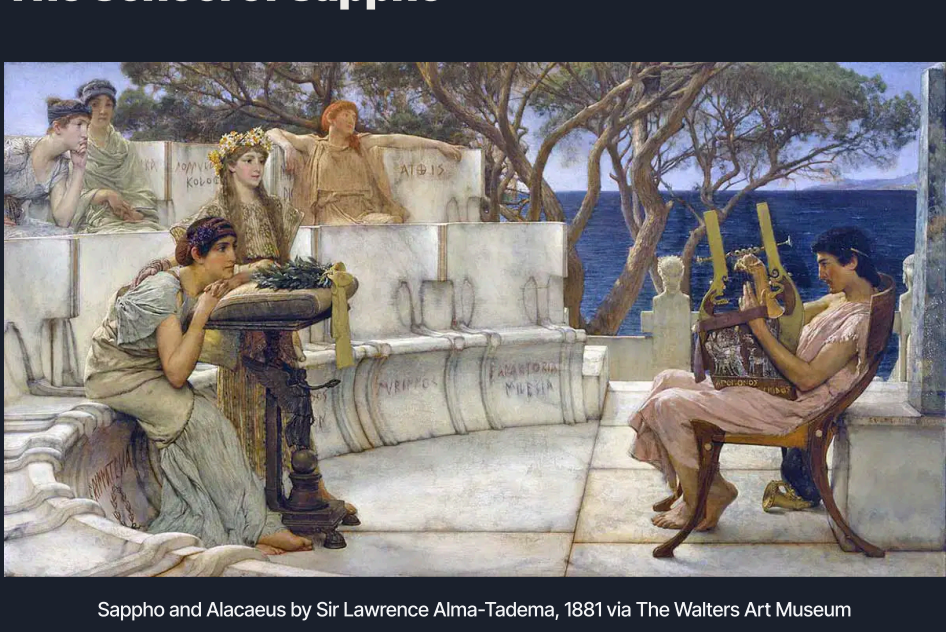


Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene by Simeon Solomon, 1864, via The Tate

Sappho is widely recognized as one of the earliest queer icons in Western literature, having frequently celebrated the beauty and emotional power of same-sex love in her poetry. Despite ongoing scholarly debate regarding the details of her personal life, Sappho’s poems contain vivid and passionate descriptions of women that suggest a deeply personal and intimate connection with her subject matter. While some argue that these expressions of same-sex desire may have simply been a literary convention, others maintain that they reveal Sappho’s own experiences and emotions. Her work suggests a fluid and non-binary approach to love and desire, with an openness to a range of different emotional and physical experiences. Ultimately, the precise nature of Sappho’s sexuality may remain unknown, but her poetry continues to inspire and resonate with modern readers across the LGBTQ+ spectrum.

It is also worth mentioning that until the end of the 20th century, “sapphic” was used as a synonym for the admittedly more popular term “lesbian” (today used to denote a homosexual woman). As is evident, the history of both terms (“sapphic” and “lesbian”) goes all the way back to Sappho of Lesbos and her poetry.

The School of Sappho

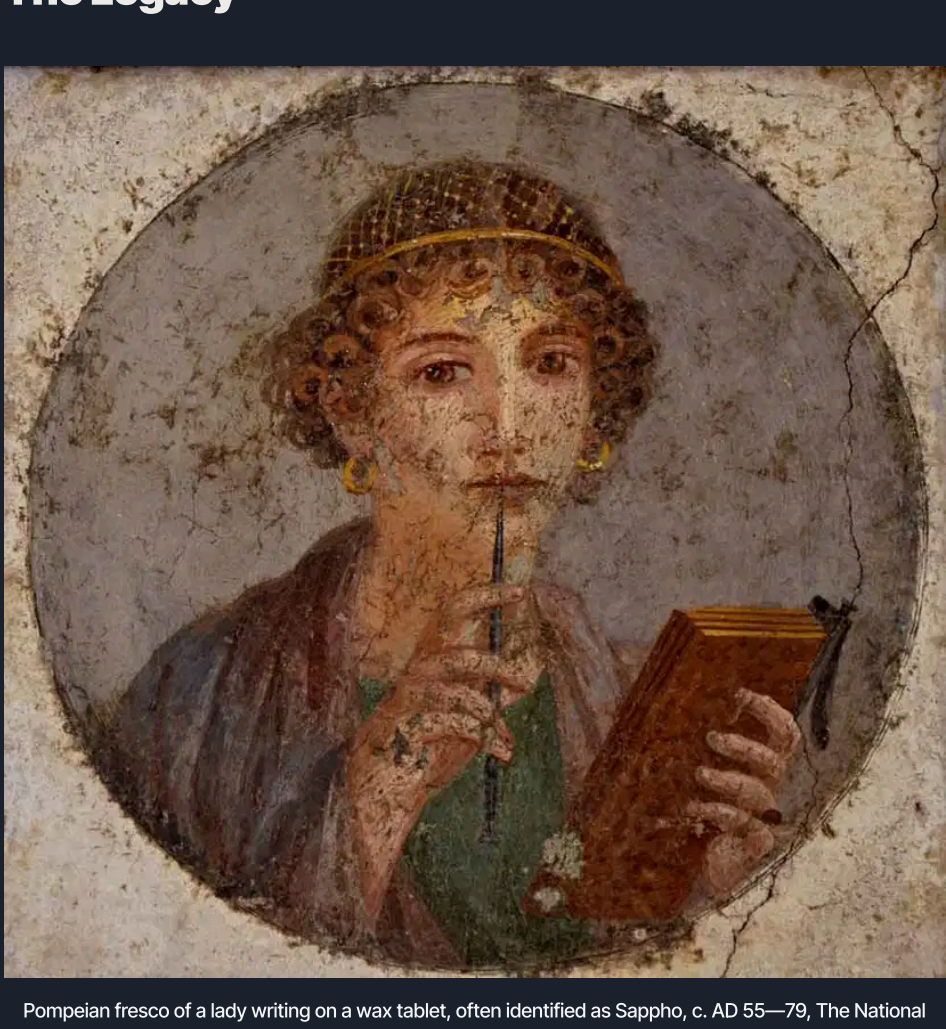


Sappho and Alacaeus by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1881 via The Walters Art Museum

Sappho’s school is a legendary educational institution that existed on the island of Lesbos in ancient Greece, and it is celebrated for its contributions to women’s education. Although little historical information is available about the school, several ancient writers such as Strabo, Plutarch, and Ovid provide accounts of its structure and purpose. The school was designed to offer young women a comprehensive education in poetry, music, dance, and other arts, with an emphasis on cultivating creativity and refining artistic skills. Located in Sappho’s home, on a hill overlooking the city of Mytilene, the school attracted students from all over Greece. Sappho was widely recognized as a skilled and inspiring teacher.

Sappho’s approach to education was ahead of its time, prioritizing individual expression and creativity over strict learning and conformity. By encouraging her students to explore their unique voices and perspectives, Sappho created an environment that fostered personal growth and development. Her school had a significant impact on women’s education in ancient Greece, challenging the gendered norms that limited women’s educational opportunities to domestic skills and basic literacy.

The Legacy



Pompeian fresco of a lady writing on a wax tablet, often identified as Sappho, c. AD 55—79, The National Archaeological Museum, Naples

Sappho’s impact as a poet extends beyond her time, but one of the most significant aspects is her role as a trailblazer for women’s literature. As one of the few female poets from ancient Greece whose work has survived, Sappho provides a rare window into the lives and experiences of women during that era. Her poetry is celebrated for its emotional depth, exploring themes of love, desire, and loss from a uniquely female perspective. With her evocative language, rich imagery, and focus on women’s emotional lives, Sappho’s distinctive style has influenced countless writers throughout history, from the Romantic poets of the 19th century to contemporary feminist poets and writers. Many of her poems also explore same-sex desire and relationships, making her a pivotal figure in the history of queer literature and culture. Her work continues to resonate with LGBTQ+ activists and scholars as a pioneering voice from ancient times.

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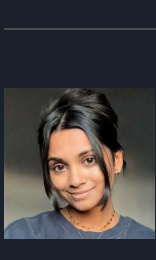

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Rhianna is a Classics graduate from the University of Exeter. Her studies focused on Ancient Greek and Latin, allowing her to explore a range of ancient texts. She is especially interested in mythology, language, and psychology, with her dissertation focusing on applying Freudian psychoanalysis to Homer’s Odyssey.

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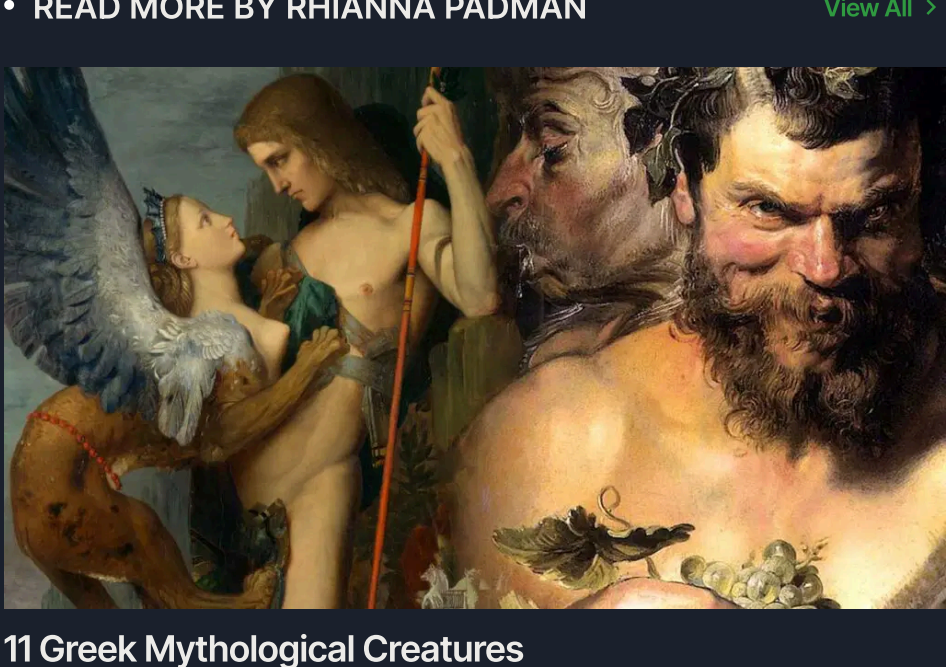

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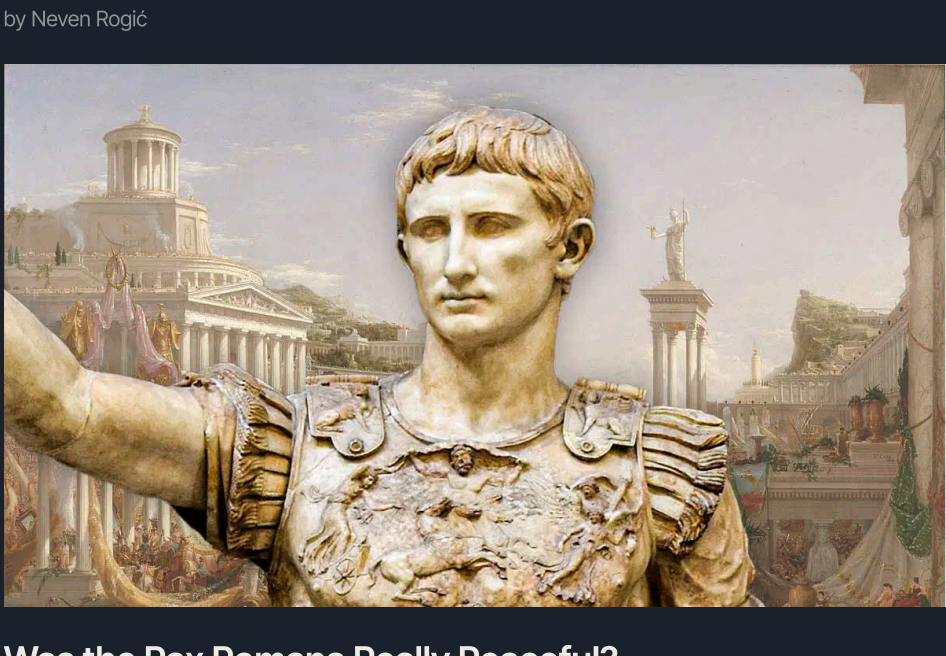

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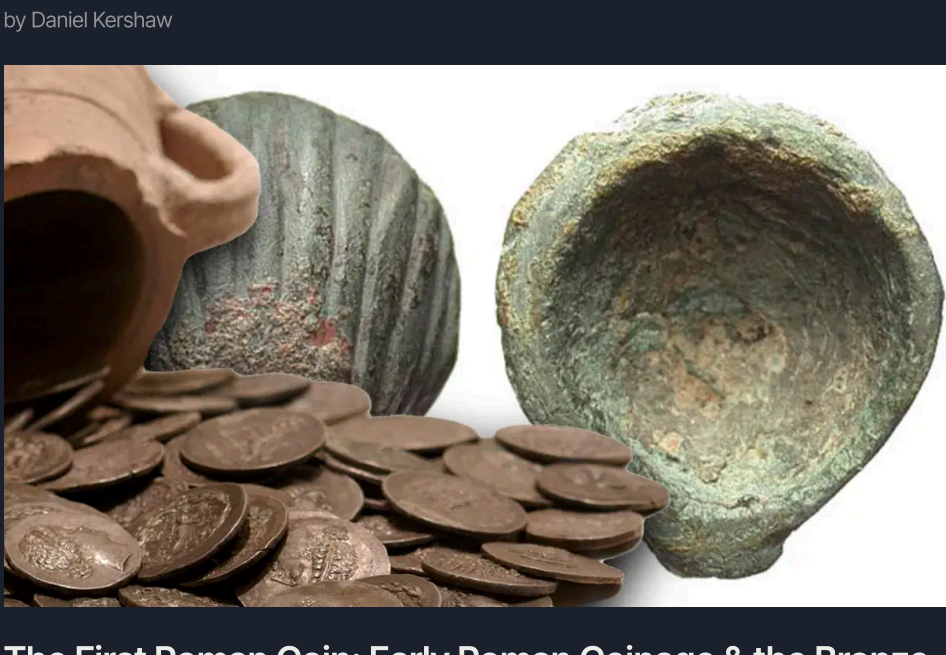

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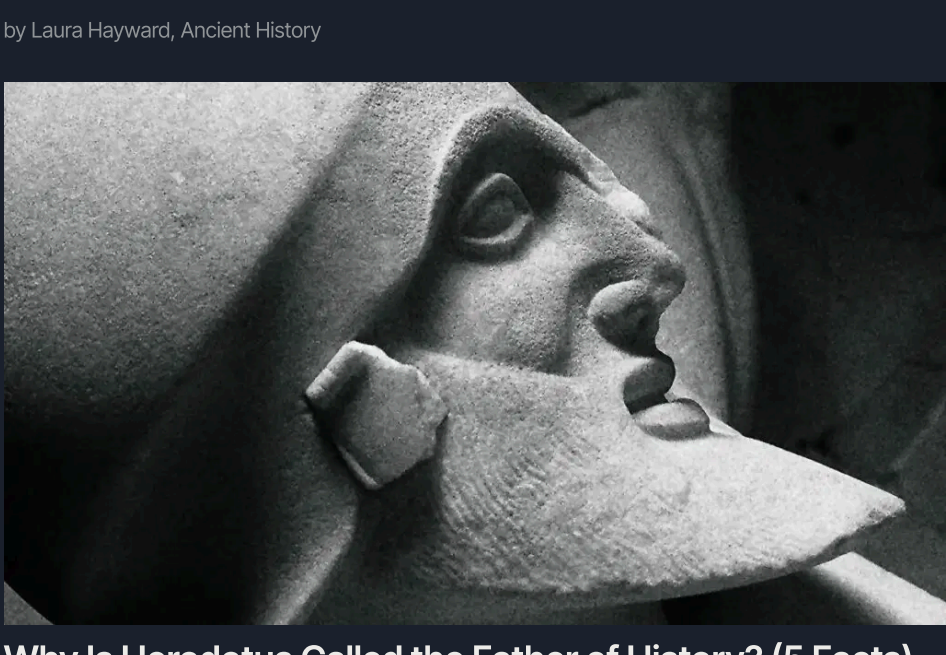

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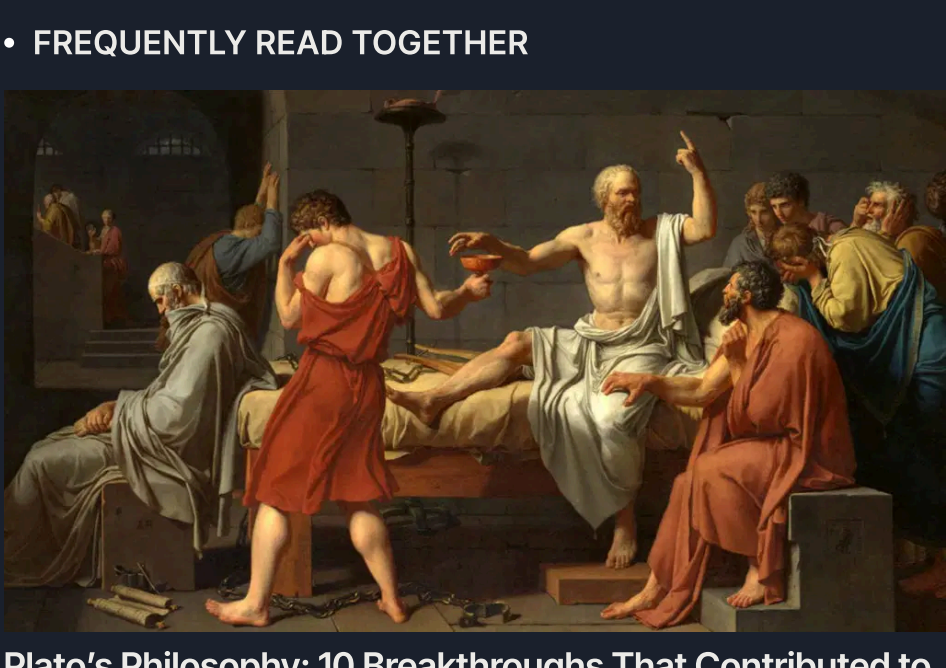

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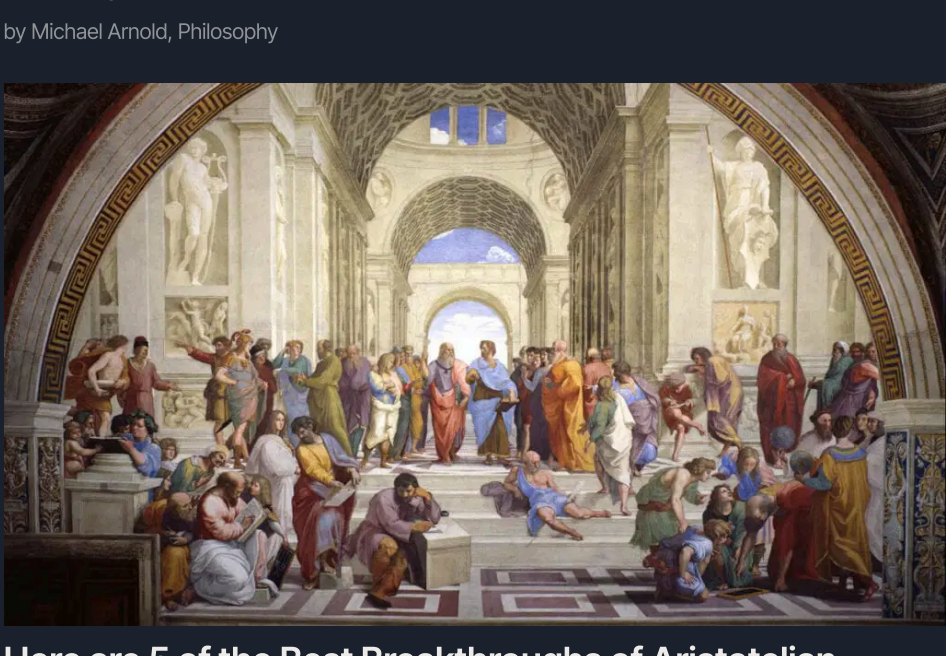

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